A small slice of the Bihar poll pie

After Asaduddin Owaisi, it is the president of the Ittehad-e-Millat Council, Tauqeer Raza Khan, who has jumped into Bihar election fray. A recent critic of the so-called secular parties, he can be expected to split the Muslim votes further

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Soon after the entry of Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen chief Asaduddin Owaisi into the Bihar poll fray, Barelvi cleric and national president of the Ittehad-e-Millat Council, Maulana Tauqeer Raza Khan is ready to play the spoiler for the grand alliance comprising the Janata Dal (United), the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Congress, by fielding Muslim and Dalit candidates in Seemanchal and other regions.

In a telephonic conversation with the writer, Mr Khan said that his party was considering fielding candidates in as many as 40 Assembly seats, mostly in the Seemanchal region, that has already been zoomed in on by Mr Owaisi, in a scramble for Muslim votes.

With several anti-BJP parties competing with each other to get Muslim support in the upcoming election, Mr Khan claimed that his party, the IMC, enjoyed the support of both the Muslims and the Dalits. "Ours is not a Muslim party alone and as Kanshi Ram stood for, I am for the unity of Dalit and Muslims (*ittehad*)," asserted Mr Khan.

While Mr Khan said that the list of candidates of his party for the upcoming Bihar poll would be declared in a few days, he did not rule out a possibility of lending support to a political party which is ready to give Muslims their due share (*hissedari*) in power and development (*vikas*). Mr Khan campaigned for the RJD in previous Bihar elections that the party lost, but this time, he has become a critic of 'secular' parties.

For example, while he blamed the grand alliance for "ignoring the Muslims" and considering them "helpless" (*majboor*), he said that his party

was open to supporting anyone, including the NDA, if it gives Muslims a share in power.

It has to be kept in mind that such a stance has recently been taken by the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz, an organisation for backward and Dalit Muslims. The PMM has recently said that, "It may consider supporting the Bharatiya Janta Party if it accepts its demands that include proportionate share in power."

Like the PMM, Mr Khan too defended his position to give conditional support to the BJP-led NDA Government as it was the 'secular' Governments that have inflicted excess (*zyadati*) — such as framing youths in terror charges, communal violence on Muslims. For instance, while addressing a public meeting in Purnia on Monday, Mr Khan said that the Congress, which had ruled over this country for 48 years after independence, played a role in bringing down the condition of Muslims to that of Dalits.

Besides taking a dig at the Congress, he also blamed Samajwadi Party Chief Mulayam Singh Yadav for working under the instruction of the BJP, as he had pulled out of the grand alliance, forming the Third Front comprising the Nationalist Congress Party and the Samajwadi Janata Dal.

Interestingly, Mr Khan shared the platform with the general secretary of the Nationalist Congress Party, Tariq Anwar last month in a Muslim-Dalit Jan Adhikar Rally in Patna, but he is now maintaining a distance from Mr Anwar after media reported that he was projected as the chief ministerial candidate by the SP-NCP alliance.

While political observers do not see any prospect of Mr Khan's success in the Bihar polls, they do recognise that if his party contests the election, it may attract some Muslims voters, particularly the Barelvis, in few pockets that would contribute to further divide the Muslim votes.

The main social base of Mr Khan, the Barelvi sect makes up a large share of the Sunni Muslim in Bihar. According to *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (1989), Barelvis are "a Muslim sect in India who concentrate on experiencing the presence of the Prophet Muhammad during worship, and believe they find it in ecstasies which sometimes render them insensible."

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The Pioneer. Delhi Edition 29 Sep. 2015. Page-09